

NATURAL WONDERLAND

Progress Has Cost the Jersey Meadows Its White Cedar Forest, but the Marshes Still Offer Assorted Game for Hunters, Many Birds and Flowers for the Nature Lovers

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

OUT on the frosty meadows near Moonachie a beagle intermittently sounded his lackluster yelp, in the way of a hunter not yet on the trail. Then, abruptly, the beagle voice changed to an eager bay; the trail of the rabbit had touched the dog's nose. The joyous sound of a beagle at work came closer and closer to where I stood on a narrow path cut through 10-foot-high foxtails.

Now a human cry of encouragement mixed with the deep-throated baying: "Come on, Babe! Go, Babe! Go, Babe! Get 'em Babe, get 'em!"

Babe was trying, and I had the sickening awareness that unless the quarry veered off, I stood as much chance as the rabbit of being the target in that dense, rush-filled area. Aware of me, perhaps, the rabbit changed course, followed by both Babe and his master. I fled the foxtails, scrambled atop a nearby dike where I couldn't possibly be mistaken for a rabbit. Nothing—dog, hunter, rabbit—could be seen in the growth below, but a shot put an end to the unseen chase. Minutes later, surprisingly close by, dog and man emerged from the marsh and climbed the dike.

The hunter held up the rabbit for me to see and seemed only slightly

Hunters and nature lovers enjoy different aspects of New Jersey's 30,000-acre wasteland. The fourth of a series on meadows.

less pleased than Babe. Then the pair walked eastward on the dike, to seek game away from such human interlopers as I.

SO a "natural" life continues in the thousands upon thousands of acres of Jersey Meadows which continue to resist stubbornly the encroachment of such mere mortals as road builders and factory site developers. Whoever



Jack Churuti of Jersey City, trapper in the meadows for some 50 years, chops through six inches of ice to pull up muskrat. Pelts bring 75 cents apiece. Churuti traps 750-800 a season.

mourns the "good old days" of the meadowland or gets visions about the future usually overlooks the "natural" meadows of today.

The meadowlands aren't completely spoiled—yet.

Hunters still stalk game out there, ranging from rabbits to pheasants and several types of ducks and geese. Trappers set their box traps in creeks and mosquito drainage ditches to snare the wary muskrat. The muskrat, in turn, industriously digs into and through man-made dikes. Birds quietly hatch their young in the midst of soot and smell, and a variety of wild flowers stubbornly return to bloom each year in defiance of salty tides, sewer-fouled streams and the choking foxtails (or phragmites communis, to be botanically correct).

There are those who go down to the meadows to pick cattails, in the

long-cherished belief that burning the thick, brown, frankfurter-like "tail" wards off mosquitoes better than anything laboratory chemists have yet created. "Better than citronella, any day," a meadows veteran will tell you.

Boatsmen paddle or pole flat-bottomed boats across shallow creeks, usually in hunting season to float up on the birds who frequent the wettest parts of the meadowland. At rare intervals a curious soul in an outboard motored craft will head inward off the Hackensack River to explore the dozens of slow-moving creeks. If his boat draws little water he'll see a lot, otherwise he might better stick to the Hackensack.

IT'S a placid, get-away-from-it-all existence, but this peace and quiet can flare into violent, exciting drama—as when one of the wild dogs roaming

the marshes clashes with one of the big dump rats over a choice edible on one of the garbage piles.

Frank Russo, a veteran of more than 35 years on the Elizabeth Meadows with the Union County Mosquito

Wired for Sound

Rock 'n' Roll, interspersed with moderate amounts of news and commercials and even a bit of music for the squares, gets its greatest boost from the Jersey Meadows.

Ten radio stations have their tall transmitting towers in the meadows for the simple reason that ground wires in the tidal marshes get signals off to an ideal start.

Radiating from each tower are the ground wires, 120 copper strands to each tower. The wires run along the surface, dipping into creeks and ditches when possible. Each ground wire is as long as the tower is high, and unsuspecting strangers who happen near the base of a tower feel like a fly in a spider's web.

The meadows insure practically perfect grounding. Thus, signals can travel farther with great clarity. The far-off radio listener gets a better break than motorists on the meadows, however: Sometimes conflicting programs get so mixed on a car radio that it would take an expert to tell Ricky Nelson from Perry Como.

Commission, told me of those dog-rat battles.

"Boy, that's a sight to see," he says, in what would appear to be understatement. "Sometimes the rat wins, too!"

Mr. Russo has no illusions about the meadows remaining what they are, or



Drawing from Frank Leslie's Magazine of 1870 depicts hunters shooting rail on Hackensack

meadows. Hunters still seek game there, especially rabbits, pheasants, ducks and geese.

for that matter, that the meadows are what they were 35 years ago. Still, he believes the wide open Elizabeth meadowland at the southern end of Newark Airport is one of the best hunting areas in the state.

"It's hunted plenty, too, believe me," he declares. "Sure, it's posted, but hunters sneak in anyway."

Mr. Russo also showed me piles of oyster shells strewn across parts of the open area of Elizabeth meadows now being filled in for the Port Elizabeth project. The shells were dredged out of Oyster and Bound creeks and pumped through long pipes to be used as fill in marshy areas. It is unlikely that any oysters live in these horribly polluted streams today.

THE oysters are mementoes of earlier and fresher days, when the Jersey Meadows were clean and sweet. Those days, really not more than 60 to 75 years ago, were a time to stir the heart of a naturalist.

Flowers bloomed on in profusion 75 years ago, almost in the same abundance as when the celebrated botanist, John Torrey, visited the region in 1819 to make a detailed listing of the flora of the northern meadows. His list of many score plants is prefaced

by the note that "much remains to be discovered," but Mr. Torrey did well.

Springtime in 1819 brought the Jersey Meadows white and yellow and purple violets, yellow floating arum, white trillium (nightshade), white chickweed, greenish white saxifrage, and blue veronica and many other delicate flowers. Summer saw the meadows bright with blue iris, pink and white meadow sweet, pink marsh mallows, pale purple wild hibiscus, greenish white and purple orchids, white ladies' tresses and purple snake's mouth.

Then, in the fall, goldenrod brightened the flats, wild cranberries grew in bright red plenty, cattails turned dark brown on their long stalks and wild rice dropped seeds to entice flocks of rail and other migrating wild fowl to the marshes.

RAIL shooting reached an apex at about Civil War time. Hunters scudded across the creeks and streams in shallow boats, searching through the water lilies and cattails for the awkwardly flying game bird. The rail didn't soar high off the marsh, but that added to the zest of the sport—and the sight of the little black, brown and white bird flitting through the rushes stirred generations of hunters.

Diking and ditching from the 1860s on ruined not only the rail hunting, but, accompanied by the increasing salinity of the waters, also altered radically the general flora of the region. The orchids and wild hibiscus and blue iris and white trillium were sad enough to lose, but far more serious was the disappearance of the magnificent white cedar forests which once reached out across thousands of acres of meadowland north of Newark Bay.

Those were deep, dense thickets of closely growing cedars, much like those rising from the fresh water swamp bottoms in the southern New Jersey pine barrens. The cedars have been gone from the meadows for nearly a century; why they disappeared is a matter of broad conjecture.

Most romantically, folk lore insists that local citizens, incensed by the bedeviling of bandits along the old Newark and Belleville turnpikes, cut or burned down the splendid trees to eliminate the highwaymen. There is quite possibly some truth to this because the trees would have offered fine cover from which bandits could spring upon defenseless stage coaches or solitary riders on the road.

IT would be exciting to think this is how the cedar disappeared; there is no reason why the Wild West should have all the stage-coach robberies. More prosaic, but more plausible, is the simple fact that white cedar always has been a very valuable wood and the trees probably were methodically felled—for the early home and ship builders, for railroad and turnpike bridges across the Passaic and Hackensack rivers, for ever-needed railroad ties, for the planks on the old plank roads.

Man also completely upset the ecology of the area by his tinkering and his damming. His railroad abutments clogged streams. His dikes caused the meadows to shrink and the shrunken flats were flooded when the dikes gave way. There is little doubt that the salt water at the roots of the cedars finished the job of killing off the immense trees, many of them two to three feet in diameter. The last of the white cedars died sometime in the 1930s near Secaucus.

Anyone who can stand some slogging around in the meadows can see the remains of the cedar forests at any time. But, if he's well advised, he will choose a day when the tempera-

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Not unusual sight is lone hunter treading dike in Bergen meadows. At rear is new Public Service generating station on the banks of Overpeck Creek in Ridgefield.



Magnificent white cedar forest once stretched across the meadows, surrounding both sides of Belleville and Newark turnpikes. This trunk is one of last reminders of trees which were hewed by early home, ship and road builders.

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ture snaps down to near zero and freezes over the ditches and creeks.

Jack Churuti, Jersey City trapper and meadows admirer for more than 50 of his 62 years, took me out on the meadows between Kearny and Jersey City on such a day to show me both the cedar remains and his muskrat catching skill. We followed his trap line for six hours, constantly skirting turnpikes and railroad embankments, industrial boundaries and radio transmitting towers. That day the natural wonder of the meadows came into focus for me.

OUR route started at the point where the New Jersey Turnpike arches high above Newark Turnpike. On a frozen ditch a few yards west of

Free Spirits

The meadowland has a diminishing band of citizens who live by doing what comes naturally.

Such freedom of spirit is dying. Two or three decades ago there were many residents—living in anything from abandoned refrigerator packing cases to discarded auto bodies. Some were “permanent,” like those in “Hooverville,” the tin shacks built near Newark Airport in the depression-filled 1930s. Some were “transients,” such as those who stopped by an oversized shack in the Elizabeth meadows in the 1920s and paid a nickel a night to lodge at “Red’s Hotel.”

Many meadows authorities remember the vagabonds of the marshes. They dug through the garbage dumps, finding clothing, furniture, food, and in an especially joyous moment, a quarter for a bottle of wine. Their menus were not for the finicky of appetite: The man who wondered who had first bitten on the turkey leg he was eating really belonged on the upland where such niceties matter.

A few live out there still, unfettered and free. One of them is “Whiskers,” who in his moving about, settled last in a piece of old sewer pipe rolled up on the edge of a sewer-clogged ditch. The five-foot diameter fitted “Whiskers” nicely. He lives in solitary grandeur, asking nothing of society and giving nothing—including his last name. His age is really no one’s business, but he looks about 45. If you wonder about his health, how would YOU fare in a sewer pipe during January? Weep not for “Whiskers.”

the bridge, Jack showed me white bubbles in the ice—muskrats had been there the night before, he said.

Jack chopped through six inches of ice, pulled up the trap. No muskrat. He held up the trap, really a long chicken wire box about eight inches square and about three feet long with easily swinging doors on either end.

Trappers call these “boxes,” and in response to a question, Jack said:

“Sure I make them myself. You can buy them for four and a half bucks, but with no ladies wanting muskrat and George I. Fox in New York paying only 75 cents at best for a pelt, who can buy them? A fine year this is to buy boxes!”

Once Jack and the other trappers got \$3.25 for a fine pelt. That was right after World War II and Jack took as many as 1,500 ‘rats out of the Jersey Meadows in a season. Trappers swarmed over the meadows then, but most of those fair-weather boys disappear when prices drop. Now Jack is satisfied with about 200 muskrats a month, or some 750 to 800 before the season ends in March.

THIS Churuti line is one of the most fantastic trapping runs in the world. It is right beside teeming highways, right up under the tall towers of radio stations WNEW and WMCA, parallel to the main-line tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad and close by the mountains of coal at Koppers Co.

Jack loves the meadows, has loved them for the 50-odd years since his meadow-loving father first took him out to the marshland. He has picked huckleberries in the East Rutherford section, has gathered armfuls of cattails to take home to fend off mosquitoes; as a boy went out with men and dogs to hunt muskrats with clubs at North Bergen; and, as a man, has trapped practically every acre north of Kearny at one time or another.

“Streams used to be snow white when I was a kid,” Jack reminisces. “Now look at them. Filthy. You’d think the Fish and Game people would do something.”

Modernity is not all bad, he admits. The mosquito drainage ditches keep the flooding down and add more muskrat runs to his trapping potential.

The day was cold, about 15 degrees, but the chopping was so intense that Jack took off his jacket and sat on a stump to rest. As he sat, the thought struck me: That stump is part of the old cedar forest! I snapped off a piece. The aromatic odor of cedar was there, at least a century after the tree was cut down.

HERE was a remnant of the forest, sure enough. All about us, for acres, were the stumps. Some are big, say three feet across, but the average is about a foot in diameter. We found one fallen giant, its bark gone and the wood bleached silver gray. Everywhere, tossed up in the muck dredged from the mosquito ditches, we could see stumps and branches and roots of the old forest.

Jack left wonderment over the forest remains to me. He ignored the stumps as he walked up side ditches, cut across creeks, moved through the meadows where the rounded muskrat houses made of the stalks of cattails and foxtails rear above the ice. This was a serious business; the distinct impression came that this was Churuti